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ABSTRACT

Designed for teachers and parents, this pamphlet addresses academic acceleration for gifted children and offers brief descriptions of some major types of acceleration along with issues of assessment and appropriateness for each. Early admission to kindergarten is described as attractive because it allows children to be accelerated without the disruption of social life and curriculum that later grade skipping might cause. Primary school advancement may cause concerns about serious difficulties such as loss of friendships with age peers, difficulty fitting in with the new class, and problems with both emotional and physical maturity, however, most research studies on grade skipping have not found these commonly feared effects. Many high schools and middle schools offer a wide range of acceleration options. Because students are with their age peers, there are fewer concerns about possible detrimental effects. The last type of academic acceleration described is early college entrance, one of the most controversial acceleration practices. Advantages include increased likelihood of pursing graduate studies and increased motivation due to an appropriate level of challenge. Possible negatives include difficulty with peer relations and regret at missing out on normal high school and college experiences. (CR)

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Practitioners' Guide #A9815
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What Is Academic Acceleration?

Academic acceleration is "deciding that competence rather than age should be the criteria for determining when an individual obtains access to particular curricula or academic experiences" (Benbow, 1998, p. 281). The most common form of acceleration for gifted children is grade skipping, but it can include options as diverse as early admission to school, curriculum compacting, and high school Advanced Placement courses. In recent years more schools are considering acceleration options, and more colleges are implementing special programs and provisions for younger students, but there still remain many questions and concerns in parents' and teachers' minds about the value of academic acceleration.

What follows are brief descriptions of some major types of acceleration, along with issues of assessment and appropriateness for each.

Early Admission to Kindergarten

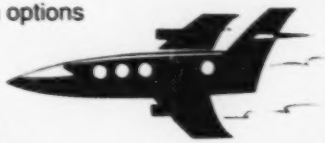
This option is attractive because (a) it saves parents of gifted children the expense of a year of preschool, (b) it allows children to be accelerated without the disruption of social life and curriculum that later grade skipping might cause, and (c) it provides bright students with intellectual stimulation appropriate to their ability rather than tying them to what has been called "the tyranny of the calendar" (Robinson & Weimer, 1991, p. 29). This can be a difficult acceleration option, because there are no prior academic records to consult. All children being considered for early admission should be examined for cognitive and academic ability but also for motor development, health, size, stamina, and social-emotional maturity. Robinson and Weimer list a battery of tests that they recommend for screening candidates for early admission to kindergarten and first grade, for example the Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scale of Intelligence, Revised (WPPSI-R), and the Vineland scales.

Primary School Advancement

The major acceleration option discussed in primary school is grade skipping, sometimes called double promotion—in other words, advancing a child more than one grade at the end of a school year. It is a little easier to select students for acceleration during these years, because they have a past record of academic achievement, maturity level, and social-emotional interaction with peers and teachers. There is great concern among parents and educators that grade skipping may cause serious difficulties such as loss of friendships with age peers, difficulty fitting in with the new class, and problems with both emotional and physical maturity. However, most research studies on grade skipping have not found these commonly feared effects, and it has been pointed out that for a gifted child the effects of being stuck in an inappropriate and boring class may be far worse.

Secondary School Acceleration

There are a wide range of acceleration options available at many high schools and middle schools, including fast-paced classes, continuous progress curricula, independent study, part-time college course work, and special classes or schools for high-ability youth. Advanced Placement classes, which offer the possibility of receiving college credit, are one of the most popular options, followed by the opportunity to actually take college classes in high school (Cornell, Callahan, Bassin, & Ramsay, 1991). There are fewer concerns about possible detrimental effects of acceleration programs such as Advanced Placement classes because AP students remain with their age peers.



Early College Entrance

This is one of the most controversial acceleration practices, possibly because of the media coverage that is often given to children who enter college as early as age 10 or 11. There has been great variation in the success of radical accelerants, and while there have been a few high-profile "failures" there have also been many who went on to success and even eminence in their adult lives. Advantages of entering college early for extremely bright children include: increased likelihood of pursuing graduate studies or studying in diverse academic areas, increased motivation due to an appropriate level of challenge, and possible higher career productivity due to early age of graduation. Some negative possibilities include: difficulty with peer relations, trouble competing with older students in such activities as sports or music, discrimination due to young age, regret at missing out on normal high school and college experiences, and being forced to choose a major field too early.

There are several well-known programs that work hard to create a positive environment for very young college students, such as Simon's Rock College in Massachusetts, The Program for the Exceptionally Gifted at Mary Baldwin College in Virginia, the Texas Academy of Mathematics and Science, the Early Entrance Program (EEP) at the University of Washington, and the EEP at California State University. Much research and work with acceleration is also done by the Study for Mathematically Precocious Youth (SMPY) at Iowa State University, and the Institute for Academic Advancement of Youth—Center for Talented Youth at Johns Hopkins University.

Research Facts

Grouping students by chronological age has been a common practice in classrooms in the United States for only the last century or so. Acceleration was used, with some frequency, in the one-room schoolhouses of the 18th and 19th centuries.
(Brody & Stanley, 1991, p. 103; Benbow, 1998, p. 281)

Educational practitioners generally regard early entrance and acceleration as unacceptable options for meeting the educational needs of gifted children and feel that they jeopardize social-emotional adaptation.
(Jones & Southern, 1991, p. 53)

Rogers challenged the idea that acceleration may have negative consequences for gifted learners. Her 1991 research synthesis suggests that most acceleration options have minimal social and emotional effects.
(Rogers, 1991, p. 24)

Information in this practitioners' guide is based on:

Benbow, C. P. (1998). Acceleration as a method for meeting the academic needs of intellectually talented children. In J. VanTassel-Baska (Ed.), *Excellence in educating gifted and talented learners* (pp. 279-294). Denver: Love Publishing.

Brody, L. E., & Stanley, J. C. (1991). Young college students: Assessing factors that contribute to success. In W. T. Southern & E. D. Jones (Eds.), *The academic acceleration of gifted children* (pp. 102-132). New York: Teachers College Press.

Cornell, D. G., Callahan, C. M., Bassin, L. E., & Ramsay, S. G. (1991). Affective development in accelerated students. In W. T. Southern & E. D. Jones (Eds.), *The academic acceleration of gifted children* (pp. 74-101). New York: Teachers College Press.

Jones, E. D., & Southern, W. T. (1991). Objections to early entrance and grade skipping. In W. T. Southern & E. D. Jones (Eds.), *The academic acceleration of gifted children* (pp. 51-73). New York: Teachers College Press.

Robinson, N. M., & Weimer, L. J. (1991). Selection of candidates for early admission to kindergarten and first grade. In W. T. Southern & E. D. Jones (Eds.), *The academic acceleration of gifted children* (pp. 29-50). New York: Teachers College Press.

Rogers, K. B. (1991). *The relationship of grouping practices to the education of the gifted and talented learner.* (RBDM 9101). Storrs, CT: University of Connecticut, The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented.

What is the NRC/GT?

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